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ABSTRACT

Poetry can serve as a vehicle for therapeutic self-reflection and exploration. Sociocultural poetry, writings that address the social, cultural, and racial experience of members of oppressed groups, can assist pre-service teachers and counselors explore emotions pertaining to convergence of race, gender, and ethnicity. Used in conjunction with the Counselor Empathy Model, this poetry helps develop the concept of sociocultural empathetic understanding. The goals of this approach are to: (1) explore the experiences of persons from marginalized groups as expressed through poetry; (2) understand use of poetic metaphor as a mediator between lived experiences; (3) grasp importance of acknowledging feelings behind another's experiences through counselor empathy and active listening; and (4) view poetry as being transformative in terms of motivation, social action, and diversity awareness. Assisting pre-service teachers and counselors in developing empathic understanding will help them see each person as unique and treat them in nonjudgmental ways. (Contains 40 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Shelling Beans:

The use of sociocultural poetry to assist pre-service teachers and counselors develop empathic understanding of cultural differences

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Abstract

Sociocultural poetry used in conjunction with a counselor empathy model can be employed to assist pre-service teachers and counselors explore feelings and emotions that pertain to the convergence of race, gender and ethnicity. The model can also be utilized to assist in the development of basic empathy skills

Shelling Beans: The use of sociocultural poetry to assist pre-service teachers and counselors develop empathic understanding of cultural differences

"Come son she said in a voice both nice and sweet,

come sit here at the table

and help your ole' mama while she still able

chile' what a day I've seen -

grab that sack and help shell these beans!

Mama, I said with an incredulous voice,

I came here by choice,

I've been out walking with kings and queens,

I don't remember nothing about shelling beans!"

The above verse is from a poem I wrote entitled "Shelling Beans." "Shelling Beans" is the story of a young man who discovers, through his mother's wisdom, what real wealth is and why it's important to remember the common and simple things in life (Ingram, 2000). As a counselor educator and performance poet, I have recited this piece throughout the country. The response is always overwhelming and I've often asked my self why? Upon further reflection, I realize that people regardless of race, ethnicity and gender can relate to the life lessons learned in the poem. These life lessons include the following: 1) It's easy to lose sight of the perspective of others as we strive to reach educational, professional and personal goals and 2) familial and cultural values can often be abandoned and replaced with societal ones that perpetuate stereotypes and bias . As a result of these life lessons, this sociocultural poem serves as the foundational core of my work as a professor and poet.

In this article, I will define and describe the use of poetry and its applicability to assist pre-service teachers and counselors develop awareness of and empathy for cultural differences. I will also provide goals for the use of poetry in the classroom and a six-step process that can be utilized by pre-service teachers and counselors to assist them learn basic empathy skills. Finally, I will explore thoughts concerning the importance of life lessons and reconnecting with core attributes that promote empathic relationships among people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Sociocultural Poetry in the Helping Relationship

Poetry can serve as a viable means of therapeutic self- reflection and exploration (Freeman, 1999; Mazza, 1999; Salman, 2000). The historical and personal experiences documented through poetry can serve as a mechanism to raise awareness and educate future generations about the importance of life long learning (Baird Carlson, 1995; McCoy, 1985). More importantly, the dual nature of poetry is significant for both the reader and the writer. Readers interact with text and therefore are interacting with the writer's lived experience. As an educator of pre-service teachers and counselors, I stress the importance of interdependence between groups in my classroom (Carkhuff, 1969). In my opinion, it is only through empathic relationships or partnerships that individuals can gain true understanding of other persons. Therefore, I believe it's important for my students to understand the perspective of others as well as themselves (Garcia, & Zea, 1997; Garretson, 1993; Kuo, & Kavanaugh, 1994; Sue & Sue, 1990; Pedersen, P.B., Draguns, J.G., Lonner, W.J, & Trimble, J.E., 1996; Uba, 1994).

In my opinion, understanding another person's perspective, culture or worldview can

be a daunting challenge. It requires moving beyond self (i.e., biases, judgments, etc) and empathically entering the world of the other person. To assist my students accomplish this goal; I integrate my own poetry into the curriculum as an alternative way to teach empathy skills, specifically empathy skills that pertain to understanding culturally diverse students and clientele.

In fact, I have chosen the art and science of poetry, specifically sociocultural poetry to serve as the epicenter and philosophical base of my work as a counselor educator and qualitative researcher. I define sociocultural poetry as writings that address the social, cultural and racial experiences of members of oppressed groups. The therapeutically metaphoric content in these writings has sustained me personally and professionally. As an African American assistant professor at a predominantly white institution, it is through these writings that I find the voice to critically challenge the documented historical, racial, and cultural stereotypes that exist about people of color (Dubois, 1968 Wallace, 1979; Takaki, 1994).

These writings also provide the basis for my scholarly activity in the following ways: 1). They serve as a medium for the systematic study of how youth and adults of color and those who are members of the dominant culture construct their understanding of cultural diversity and 2). How these same youth and adults transform their cultural identity toward more multicultural worldviews?

As a counselor educator, I realize that the majority of students I instruct are Euro-American, upper middle class and in many instances culturally encapsulated (Wrenn, 1962). Due to the campus' rural location, ethnic diversity among the student population is scant and

opportunities to interact with different cultures are few. Yet, these students are required based on national and state accrediting standards to have a working knowledge of diverse populations (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2000; Teacher Standards and Practices Commission , 2000). In addition, it is assumed that upon completion of their degree, they will also be comfortable dealing with student issues that pertain to the convergence of race, gender and ethnicity (Robinson & Howard, 2000). Based on my own lived experience as an African American male, I believe that it is very difficult to move beyond one's own cultural comfort zone and negotiate the hierarchical nature of the dominant discourse

With the pre service teachers and counselors, I utilize sociocultural poetry in conjunction with a Counselor Empathy Model (See Yager, Brecht & Ocheltree, 1975 for an elaboration of this model) to develop the concept of sociocultural empathic understanding with pre-service teachers and counselors. To begin with, a poem is read or recited that pertains to a person's sociocultural experience. Students are asked to critically process the following six stages. Often the character is the writer, however one should not always make that assumption – the most important consideration is connecting to the lived experience expressed in the poem or story.

1. "What can I pat myself on the back for with respect to understanding the character or writer of the poem or story 's lived experience?" (Too often we think we are not doing enough to forge strong working alliances with our students or clients. In many instances, we don't commend our efforts or ourselves). Being open to listening to the poem or story being told, moving away from classroom and work distractions and

connecting to the experience of others are reasons to commend self involvement.. Ex "Having listened to the poem, I feel I have new insights into that person's lived experience."

2. "What did the character or writer directly and verbally state about their feelings and thoughts as it pertained to the convergence of race, gender and ethnicity?" (Most often, feeling words and phrases are directly expressed and identifiable. Therefore, listen closely to the words that are expressed during the reading of the poem or story. In many interactions, verbal information can serve as a reference point for understanding and communication). Ex. "In the poem, the character described his feelings and thoughts growing up as a Black male in the rural South during the 1960's."
3. "What did the character or writer express about feelings and thoughts of the person in the poem or story through nonverbal cues. An example can be taken from the poem, I wrote entitled, "Beneath the Shade of the Sheltering Tree near the Clear Cool Waters of the River Called America" (Ingram, 2000). In this poem, verses describe the story of a Native American woman that "Sat by the clear cool waters of the river called America and clasped her colored hands and cried." These lines illustrate both verbal and nonverbal despair, as well as the frustration that resulted from the believing in dominant discourse ideology that drinking from the clear cool waters of America will taint the water for others (i.e., Whites). Please note nonverbal and verbal descriptions may not necessarily be congruent with one another. Therefore, the emphasis should be to listen to metaphor and imagery that describe nonverbal cues and ask questions that are designed to seek clarification and increase level of understanding.

4. "How am I feeling right at this moment or at the conclusion of the poem or story?" Sometimes, our own feelings will warn us in advance that we need to be attending to something about a potential interaction that is not yet in our awareness. Do not ignore these emerging warning signs. Process these warning signals and seek consultation from a colleague or supervisor, if necessary. An example is as follows: "I felt uncomfortable during the point in the poem that the character clasped her colored hands and cried. I need to process further why I felt so uncomfortable"

5. "If I were the character in or writer of this poem or story and had this person's lived experience, background, culture, and world view how would I feel?" [This is not a question about how we would feel in the character or writer's situation; it is a question of how we might feel if we had experienced the character or writer's life, culture and history.] Therefore, the following questions should be considered:

   a). "How do I perceive or practice teaching and counseling from my worldview and sociocultural reality?"

   b). "What would be okay within my culture to express with a person of power over my grades or life?"

   c). "How would I react to questions and express concerns?"

   d). "How might I feel if I had experienced the individuals' life, culture, history or oppression?"

In this stage, pre-service and counselors attempt to acknowledge and validate the student's experience and related feelings. If you find that you can't understand the

experience, attempt to resonate with the feelings behind their experience or the nonverbal cues being expressed. This is not the time to be defensive or express feelings of guilt.

6). "How can I reflect the character's feelings and thoughts and form either one of the following empathy statements that demonstrate understanding of the verbal and nonverbal information that occurred during the reading/sharing of the poem or story: "It sounds like the character or writer felt. . .when..." or " I notice that the character or writer seemed . . . when. . ."

Again, if there is difficulty understanding the individuals lived experience as it pertains to culture, gender or ethnicity attempt to resonate with the feelings, thoughts or non-verbal behavioral cues that exist behind the lived experience [In other words, acknowledge and validate the feelings, thoughts and nonverbal cues expressed.] For example, resonating with the Native American woman in the poem whose hands were clasped, might mean attempting to understand the frustration and level of oppression she might have experienced in her life as a woman of color.

This sociocultural empathy model seeks to provide a foundation for assisting pre-service teachers and counselors develop empathic understanding of their students lived experiences. It is an especially helpful training tool with pre-service teacher or counselors who will work with students from backgrounds very different than their own. It builds a framework of respect, understanding and exploration. It sets a stage where it is safe to recognize differing approaches to counseling or teaching. It assists both pre-service teachers and counselors ascertain information from students and make better decisions based on experiencing the six stages in conjunction with the reading of a poem or story that pertains to the convergence of

race, gender and ethnicity. Further, I think this process accentuates the foundational attributes inherent in sociocultural poetry such as respect, dignity, value, integrity, and equality. These core attributes are essential elements in constructing and deconstructing cultural concepts.

My goals in using this poetic or storying technique include the following:

1) To conceptually explore the lived experiences of persons from marginalized groups (Aponte & Wohl, 1999, Helms & Cook, 1999; Lee, 1999, Robinson & Howard, 2000) as it is expressed through poetry and creative expression (Gladding, 1992).
2) To understand the use of poetic metaphor (Mazza, 1999; Angelou, 1978) as mediator between those lived experiences and the dominant discourse (Friere, 1970; hooks, 1990 West, 1993).
3) To grasp the importance of acknowledging the feelings behind another person's experience through counselor empathy and active listening (Yager, Brecht & Ocheltree, 1975; Egan, 1994; Rogers, 1980) and;
4) To view poetry in counseling contexts as being transformative in terms of motivation, social action (Lee & Walz, 1998; Clemente, Mandell, & Terndrup, 1998) and diversity awareness (Banks; 1994).

In the following section, verses from the poem "Shelling Beans" are interspersed throughout to illustrate the above goals, as well as the developmental stages of empathic understanding.

To conceptually explore the lived experiences of persons from marginalized groups as it is expressed through poetry and creative expression.

Shelling Beans

is for the common man,

I gave that up when I left the land

so ask me mama about my plate of riches

you need a new dress

I'll by you one inlaid with gold stitches!"

As a counselor educator, my goal in the classroom is to assist pre-service teachers and counselors to metaphorically "shell beans." In my opinion, the process of shelling beans as previously stated pertains to treating others with respect, dignity, integrity and equality. These are attributes that are often forgotten, yet need to be reinforced to better serve the growing culturally diverse student populations. As we know, school demographics are changing and growing numbers of students are enrolling from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. These students are in need of teachers and counselors who can empathically understand the cultural dynamic (Sue & Sue, 1990) the bi-lingual component (Garcia & Zea, 1997; Henkin, Singleton, & Nguyen, 1984) and the many new ways of being and learning that these students bring into the classroom. Yet, many pre-service teachers and counselors still ask the question, "How do I build trust and empathic understanding with students when issues pertain to social, economic, cultural and racial differences?" This is a difficult question given cultural mistrust, negative racial and cultural stereotyping, and in many areas the growing backlash against multiculturalism (Howard, 1999).

Often attempts to embrace new paradigms and world philosophies are thwarted by age-old doctrine and beliefs that espouse messages of sympathy for students and clients as

oppose to messages of empathic understanding of their cultural differences. Critical theorists (Collins, 1998; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1990; McLaren, 1998) attempt to challenge these faulty assumptions, yet are thwarted in their efforts by resistance to change and mechanisms that espouse power over rather than power with ideology. In addition, their academic writings have often been criticized by educators and counselors who wrestle with the practicability of turning academic writing and theory into practice. Consequently, many pre-service teachers and counselors leave the university setting still unsure about cultural constructs and their applicability with different populations.

More importantly they leave without understanding the universal commonality that exist in human experiences--experiences that through sociocultural poetry can be disseminated, shared, and discussed in the classroom setting to increase awareness of and aid in the process of multicultural understanding.

To understand the use of poetic metaphor as mediator between those lived experiences and the dominant discourse

"She looked at me in her wise old way,

although I did not know exactly what she would say

I knew that it would contain the riches of the ages

you see she had lived a good life, therefore her life book was full of pages.

The above verse was written to speak to the experience of an older African American woman whose lived experience had afforded her great wisdom and insight. Her life has provided her with opportunities to make meaning of her existence in a world that has often placed her on the margins of society. Yet a world that still offered her the level of cultural

consciousness necessary to embrace her heritage, culture and a way of being that promotes strong self-pride and self-identity. Cultural consciousness in my estimation is the awareness of the beliefs and values held by your own individual ethnic group. These beliefs are adopted and embraced by the individual and serve as the foundation for viewing the world. Thus, an individual with a strong cultural consciousness does not view the world through the lenses of the dominant society. The metaphoric content of sociocultural poetry provides a context for individuals to explore, release or vent pent-up feelings and/or emotions that can emanate from many different sources. These sources can be culturally or socially defined and can prohibit open expression of emotions. As we know, understanding another persons' emotions or feelings can be a difficult proposition

In the classroom or work setting, pre-service teachers and counselors will be confronted with a multitude of student emotional states. Are these emotional states the result of familial, cultural, racial, societal, political or spiritual lived experiences? How can these emotions be channeled in ways that are conducive for psychological and emotional wellbeing? To assist these students prepare for life experiences? One way, is to write, read or share poetry. Evidence suggests that reading poetry can increase levels of emotional consciousness concerning the issues expressed in the writing (Mazza, 1999). Emotional consciousness pertains to being aware of and critically analyzing the feelings and emotions that underlie life experiences and or events. Lack of awareness of these underlying emotions can lead to feelings of angst, stress or confusion. In this particular context, emotional consciousness pertains to the awareness and analyzing of feelings that results from dealing with racism and oppression and their impact on cognitive and emotional

stability. Each poem or writing provides entrée into another person's lived experience as well as opportunities for dialogue and discussion about the issues that are being discussed in the writings. Therefore, when pre-service teachers and counselors listen to and/or read poetry by people from culturally diverse populations, it has the potential to awareness of social advocacy and multicultural issues. It also has the potential to assist pre-service teachers to move beyond stereotyping and bias. Teachers and counselors can listen to the words of voices beyond the dominant discourse and attempt to resonate with the stories that are being told.

To grasp the importance of acknowledging the feelings behind another person's experience though counselor empathy

"She said, Son dont you ever forget -

no matter how big you get -

that truth wealth comes from the fruit of the earth -

from any place else - what is its true worth?"

The importance of remembering cultural roots was the catalyst for writing the above verse. In my opinion, remaining mindful of the really important things in life – not the trappings of a hierarchical society, educational credentialing or socioeconomic status, but the human condition in regard to affirming and embracing people regardless of culture, race, gender or ethnicity.

Empathy, in my opinion, is a skill that can be applied as a grounding mechanism when attempting to build rapport and trust in a relationship. Empathy is the ability to enter into

another person's world, approximate their experience, and connect based on the underlying thoughts, feelings and behaviors that occur during the interaction (Ivey, Ivey & Morgan, 1997). I further define counselor empathy as the desire and ability to listen to another person's story without judgment or bias. It means moving beyond the level of sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for another person. Furthermore, it is a hierarchical position that does not entail viewing the other person as an equal in the relationship. It means that you hear the other person, but there is still a distancing from the person that precludes the possibility for a close understanding of that person's feelings. In other words, "It happened to them and not to me - therefore, I feel sorry for them." Empathy, on the other hand, is feeling with the other person. It means being with the person in terms of approximating an understanding of their thoughts and feelings. Power is decentralized and the level of awareness is equalized since there is a synergy of spirit that occurs as the two parties' commune in a sense of oneness about a particular experience. From a counseling perspective, the counselor affirms an individual's unique way of being. Pre-service teachers and counselors need to foster this empathic ability in order to facilitate students' personal growth and development.

To view poetry in counseling contexts as being transformative in terms of motivation, social action, and diversity awareness.

"So my son,

tell me you story

is it only of the riches and the glory?

Or is also of remembering

how to do the common and simple things

like shelling beans,

in addition to all that you have seen?"

The above verse was written to describe how one could forget the circumstances of others based on perceived social status or level of educational attainment. Additionally, it was written to illustrate my understanding that I had forgotten the common and simple things in life that sustained my existence – essential things such as of reaching out to others and assisting them – regardless of my own educational and professional attainment. Furthermore, that it's important to advocate and work with others to bring about change and empathic understanding.

Social advocacy pertains to any action designed to fight injustice, discrimination, racism, gender bias, heterosexism or ageism. In addition, social advocacy means to take a stand against societal ills as an individual or as part of a collective (Clemente, Mandell & Terndrup, 1998; Lee & Walz, 1998). There are inherent differences between advocating for an individual and advocating with an individual. To illustrate, advocating with an individual recognizes the strengths that individuals bring with them. These strengths can be based on anything that has helped them survive the stressors that have caused them difficulty. On the other hand, advocating for an individual devalues the person's strengths, and reinforces their stereotyped circumstances. Advocating for has the potential to augment "power over" rather than "power with" the individual. In many instances, individuals who are being advocated for do not want assistance, therefore there is both conscious and unconscious resistance to the help and the relationship between the two parties is no longer facilitative or conducive

for personal growth and development.

Final Thoughts

Sociocultural poetry and metaphor, is poetry of engagement and disquisition. According to Komunyakaa (1999) poetry celebrates and it confronts Its passion cannot be denied or undermined. It might obliterate one reader's taste and facilitate another's. Yet, it touches the soul. According to Rogers (1980), empathy means becoming perfectly at home in another person's worldview. He further states it involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing feelings, thoughts and meanings which flow inside this other person. Empathy involves understanding the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever the person is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life, and moving about delicately without making judgements.

According to Lee (1999) "When culturally specific information is presented or discussed there is always the danger that the information will form the basis of stereotypes; in other words, making generalizations about any cultural group is potentially misleading (p. XI). Therefore, it is my view that assisting pre-service teachers and counselors develop empathic understanding through sociocultural poetry and metaphor has the potential to answer Lee's call for seeing each person as unique and empowered individual whose race, culture and background are important empathically understand.

"Mama, I said, with a trembling voice, I do remember,
I do remember and I grabbed that sack and helped shell those beans - for on that day,
I did not mind shelling beans, because I shelled them
at the feet of a Queen!"

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